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## 2010 Joint World Conference on Social Work and Social Development

### Life Raft Australia?

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#### ABSTRACT

*In the helter skelter of people legally and illegally seeking refuge in Australia, often overlooked are the realities of how to obtain that hoped for better life. One of the avenues chosen to achieve their dream is higher education; however, once enrolled in higher education many such students [termed Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD)] find they are ill equipped to achieve academic success; they become overwhelmed by the pressures of study/family/work; and ultimately lose heart and their place at university. Life raft Australia has just become another disillusioning vehicle to a depressing future. This paper discusses how universities across Australia are now putting processes in place that will enable CALD students to confront and overcome academic and social barriers, and thus realise their dream of a better life. Exemplars from the University of Tasmania provide practical models of how higher education institutions, not only in Australia but globally can assist immigrant students to self actualize; to be empowered to become integral and successful members of the Australian community.*

#### Introduction

In the Australian context the number of CALD students entering Australian universities and institutions of higher learning has increased significantly, just over the past ten years (Dickson, Lock & Carey, 2007; *Exploring the experience and needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students*, 2010). They come with expectations to succeed and to eventually gain high paying positions in the workforce. However, often with backgrounds of dispirit schooling experiences, some having already gained university degrees and others having barely received an adequate high school education; these students whatever their previous educational experience often find “making it alone” in the Australian university context a struggle at best and at worst an impossibility. To this end universities across Australia have been developing new programs to assist students struggling with the demands of academic English. Included in this assistance are not only the CALD students but also Australian domestic students with English as a first language. Often from low socio-economic backgrounds, and often students who are first in family at university, these first English speakers are also receiving government encouragement to enter university, as evidenced by the Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). Sadly programs to support both CALD and first English speakers although expanding are often underfunded with students competing for limited support staff time. This paper discusses the issues involved and how programs at the University of Tasmania are endeavouring to bridge the gap.

**Bridging the Gap**

In 1999-2000, humanitarian immigrants who entered Australia numbered 7,267 with 52,377 entering through the migration program (Hugo, Rudd & Harris, 2001, p.31). In 2008-2009 humanitarian immigrants increased to 13,507 (National Communications Branch, Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2009) with 171,318 entering Australia through the migration program (Australian Government Department of Immigration Services, 2009, p.33). Many of these immigrants or children of these immigrants are classified as culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), that is they are “those who identify as having a specific cultural or linguistic affiliation by virtue of their place of birth, ancestry, ethnic origin, religion, preferred language, language(s) spoken at home [not English], or because of their parents’ identification on a similar basis” (Disability Services Division Department of Human Services, 2004, p.33). Once settled in Australia, particularly for humanitarian immigrants the goal of a university education can seem like a once unattainable bright beacon of hope, hope for a better future. However, when such students are admitted to universities they come not only without knowledge of English as a first language, but also without the knowledge of the cultural practices associated with English that a native speaker has. Nevertheless once admitted to university they also come with the expectation to succeed. Consequently there can be a gap between their expectations and actual outcomes. To bridge that gap the University of Tasmania, like many other Australian universities, has implemented several support services. This paper addresses one of these services that of academic writing and study skills support.

**English language proficiency**

Because they are not classified as international students, domestic CALD students are not required to take a language test, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), as a prerequisite to enter Australian university programs. This is in spite of the fact fee paying international students are required to take these tests (International Student Services UTAS, n.d.), or that for skilled migrants to gain entry to Australia they are now required to have achieved at least level 6 in the IELTS test. This is the minimum levels of language proficiency needed for a person to be able to successfully communicate in the workplace (Australian Government Department of Immigration Services, 2009). In the academic context an even greater understanding of the complexities of the English language is needed. International students studying at Australian universities are required to achieve between IELTS 6 and 7 depending on the course (AEI DEEWR, 2009; International Student Services UTAS, n.d.). However for domestic CALD students to enter university, since they are classified as Australian citizens or permanent residents, for equity reasons they are not required to show evidence of their English language proficiencies. This can have a boomerang effect on these CALD university entrants, resulting in inequity, as often their basic let alone academic prowess in the English language can be sorely lacking.

Practical effects are for example sitting in a lecture theatre being addressed by a third generation “Aussie” lecturer, the speed of the talk, the accent and intonation, the peppering of purely Australian colloquial phrases, the complex theoretical terminology – can all be very difficult to follow let alone comprehend to the same depth as a native Australian English speaker. This is compounded when students have had an educational background where they have had to be absent from school for extended months to work to financially assist the family, or because of warfare (M. Hingston, UTAS CALD liaison officer, personal communication, 27 April, 2010). Apart from interrupted schooling, students may have had a more oral or rote learning tradition, either because of lack of physical resources such as books and computers, or because of cultural perceptions that

the teacher is the font of all wisdom and the student must uncritically rote learn and recall everything the teacher has imparted (Freeland, Li & Young, 2004). So whether students have had an interrupted schooling experience or have reached university level education, their cultural positioning in the education context can be very different to a student who has gone through twelve years of schooling in Australia. This can also hamper their ability to succeed once they commence their university studies.

One final area of linguistic difficulty is that of the student's first language. The way that language is structured and the extent that structure differs from English can compound their difficulties when trying to construct an essay, essay writing being one of the main ways of assessment in many Australian university courses. As UTAS international student skills advisor Lucy Sun (2010) explained citing Watkins and Biggs (2001), students with an Asian language background, such as Mandarin are used to first imparting all the details and then finally will put down the main point of what they are saying. This is the opposite of what is expected in academic English writing, where students are to state first the main point or main argument and then add confirming details and evidence. The author, who has given academic writing assistance to students across three Australian universities as well as teaching in Education faculties has noted that African students with more of a narrative language tradition tend to develop an idea like an African river that wends its way often looping back on itself. Because of this, trying to follow the thread of what a student with an African linguistic background is trying to impart can become a hair tearing event for their English speaking tutors/lecturers, who are marking their assignments. On the other hand CALD students coming from European linguistic backgrounds are more able to adapt to the structural requirements of academic English. They can do this to the degree their European language more closely conforms with English. Dutch and German speakers, for example have less difficulty than Greek or Russian speakers. This is because old English was a type of Germanic language which has laid down the basic structure for English today. Nevertheless, to have the same opportunities to succeed as Australian born students at the tertiary level - whatever the cultural, educational or linguistic background - these CALD students are in need of additional academic support.

### **Academic writing and study skills support**

At the University of Tasmania, the Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (CALT) provides experienced staff, as well as student mentors to assist both Australian born and domestic CALD students who are struggling with the requirements of academic English and study skills. Academic writing and study skills support given to all students includes advice on a range of academic skills such as:

- reading strategically
- critical thinking
- note taking
- planning and writing assignments
- subject specific writing styles
- grammar and expression
- referencing
- revising for exams
- oral presentation techniques

This is done giving guidance by explaining steps in planning an essay, directing students as to the best way to find resources, providing comments on the structure of an essay, giving comments on

specific paragraphs, and also referring students to other support sources, such as their subject specific liaison librarians, or university online writing resources. If students are experiencing difficulties with particular assignments they will be asked to bring their Unit Outlines containing assignment criteria, plus any other extra material lecturers have posted on their online blackboard sites. These materials will be used as a springboard to inculcate all of the above strategies. The first step is how to successfully determine key words/concepts in the assignment question; effectively analysing the question being a key to writing a successful assignment.

For CALD students analysing the question can present additional difficulties. This is because of linguistic and cultural differences. CALD students can have a tendency to literally interpret a question in its strict grammatical form, without understanding the nuances of key words and phrases. Without this nuanced understanding they can fail to comprehend the need to emphasise certain aspects of the subject matter and only briefly allude to less essential aspects.

Armed with a misguided understanding of how to proceed, and sometimes panicked because of what seems to be an overwhelming task of researching the topic CALD students can then make several mistakes in researching and writing. They can focus on the words/concepts in the assignment question they have understood and neglect other areas. They can fail to grasp the focal issues of readings, and so misinterpret the main thrust of the reading's argument. They can over-research, and then because of cultural beliefs regarding the supremacy of the expert, large slabs of text can simply be patched together in a hope that this patchwork of 'expert' writing will more than adequately answer the assignment question. Whereas in fact this type of writing is considered plagiarism and can result in the student failing their assignment. Learning support staff assisting CALD students often find it a difficult and continuing task to explain the importance of gaining individual understandings of the topic, and then putting these understandings into the student's own words – words which the student is having difficulty writing even in a basic grammatically correct way. One individual student springs to mind, with whom the author spent two hours reading through his failed assignment, helping him pick out the key issues, order those issues in a connected sequence and then in his own words rewrite one page. This student then went home to complete the assignment revision. He returned with the first page which he had earlier successfully rewritten; it had been put back into the plagiarised expert's words – such was his strength of belief in the words of the expert. He had stayed up till 4am to do his rewrite!

### **Recommendations for success**

Consequently, learning support staff need extra time not only to assist CALD students in structural and grammatical features of English writing, but also sometimes more importantly in the cultural requisites of writing academically in an Australian university context. At UTAS although domestic CALD students comprise an expanding 4% of the total student body (Kirkman & Hingston, 2010), those seeking academic assistance represent a much higher proportion of the student body. The author has noted over the time period of week 2 (semester 1, March 2010) to week 10 (semester 1, May 2010), her student appointments have comprised 73 Australian born appointments and 55 CALD students, that is out of a 4% university enrolment 43% are CALD appointments. A comparison of length of time she has spent with CALD versus Australian born students reveals, those with English as a second language have taken only an average of 5 minutes more per appointment, with such CALD students having almost equally the same number of repeat appointments as Australian first English speaking students. However, these comparatively similar findings could be said to relate more to organisational strictures than actual student needs, as there is a rule of thumb guideline to only provide ½ hour appointments to all students; a guideline which

has to be more rigorously enforced when there is a high demand for individual appointments. Apart from being able to obtain individual assistance from experienced staff, CALD students along with their Australian born counterparts can also drop in on a casual basis for assistance from trained student mentors, frequently in a group situation. Mentors are usually in their second or third year with high grade point averages, and have participated in ongoing training sessions. However, again many times for cultural reasons CALD students often prefer to seek assistance from senior staff in a private situation. In UTAS's CALT Student Learning Space Launceston between week 2 and week 10 of 2010, mentors have assisted 20 CALD students and 51 first English language speakers. This is a ratio of 28% CALD to 72% First English Speakers, which compared to the author's percentages of CALD individual appointments is considerably less. Nevertheless, when considering the CALD component of the total student body it is still significant to note that as 4% of a total student enrolment, CALD students seeking academic assistance from student mentors still represent a substantial proportion.

It could therefore be said that at this one Australian university a considerable amount of assistance is being given to CALD students in the form of academic writing/learning support; however, as the need is expanding, and because of specialized cultural and linguistic needs this support needs to be increased, so that an even greater percentage of CALD students are not merely hanging onto the life raft but are able to successfully clamber on board, and steer their raft in the direction of success.

### Key Words

CALD students, CALD linguistic and cultural needs, academic writing, academic study skills, tertiary education, tertiary learning support, first in family at university

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